

# A Tree in the Garden

*The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are one and the same tree. When the verse states ‘God caused to sprout the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge’ (Gen. 2:9) it should be understood to mean, God caused to sprout the Tree of Life which is also the Tree of Knowledge. R. JOSEPH KIMHI<sup>1</sup>*

THIS COMMENT SEEMS to fly in the face of the basic details of the creation story in the Bible. In fact, it appears to contradict outright an explicit Biblical verse where God says “now (that man has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge), lest he partake from the Tree of Life as well” (3:22).<sup>2</sup> If the trees are one and the same, then by eating from the Tree of Knowledge man had already partaken of the Tree of Life! This essay proposes a reading of the Genesis story which provides a textual and conceptual basis for R. Kimhi’s explication, based on midrashic sources. I will suggest that R. Kimhi’s commentary sheds light on fundamental issues relating to man’s mortality and his relationship with God.<sup>3</sup>

## *The Textual Starting Point*

The Bible introduces the Tree of Life stating; “God caused to sprout from the ground every tree that was pleasing to the sight and the Tree of Life *betokh*—within, the garden” (2:9). The text could have simply stated “the Tree of Life *bagan*—in the garden.” What does the word *betokh*, come to add? Onkelos translates the word *betokh* in this verse to mean *bemitsiut*—in the middle of the garden. Presumably emphasizing the central role played by this tree, Onkelos understands the Bible to locate the Tree of Life in the center of the garden.

If the Tree of Life is in the center of the garden, what is the location of the Tree of Knowledge? This we learn from Eve, when she says to the serpent

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“it is only from the tree *betokh hagan*—within, the garden—that we are forbidden to partake” (3:3). Here too, the word *betokh* is seemingly extraneous, and here too, Onkelos translates it to mean “*bemitsiut*”—in the *middle* of the garden.” As in the case of the Tree of Life, Onkelos understands the Bible to place the Tree of Knowledge in the center of the garden.

Many medieval commentators understood Onkelos’s use of the term *bemitsiut* to refer to the literal center of the garden and struggled to explain how both trees could be situated in the exact same location.<sup>4</sup> Ramban (2:9), addressing this concern, understood that the two trees were next to each other in the center of the garden. Rabbenu Bahya (2:9) viewed the trees as two branches emanating from a shared trunk which stood at the garden’s center. Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel (Rosh) (3:22)<sup>5</sup> explained that the Tree of Life was surrounded by the Tree of Knowledge such that both trees stood together, one inside the other, in the center of the garden. R. Joseph Kimhi provides an alternate commentary. He explains that the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge occupied the same exact spot because they were, in fact, the same tree!

While this disagreement appears to relate merely to the location of trees within the garden, the remainder of this essay will attempt to demonstrate that R. Kimhi’s explication has far reaching implications beyond geography and that it touches upon issues which sit at the very heart of the Biblical message imparted by the Eden story.

### A Midrashic Reading<sup>6</sup>

#### *Man from the Dust*

Man, a creation made from the dust of the ground, derives his name, Adam, in recognition of his lowly origin, *adama*—earth. And, as a creation of the earth, he will eventually return to it; “for you are created from the dust and to the dust you will return” (3:19). But is man’s mortality a result of his having sinned or was he mortal from the start? The answer to this question is, in fact, a matter of dispute within traditional rabbinic literature.

God created man from dust of the four corners of the earth in order that *wherever he would die* the earth would receive him for burial.<sup>7</sup>

Man was, *from the beginning*, destined to die as he was created from the dust.<sup>8</sup>

*Vehenai tov me’od* (1:31) *ze hamavet*—and (God saw that) creation was very good—this refers to death.<sup>9</sup>

These midrashic teachings are but a few of the sources which view man as having been created mortal.<sup>10</sup>

But, if man was to be mortal from the beginning, how are we to understand God's warning, "on the day you partake of (the Tree of Knowledge) you will die" (2:17)? This verse seemingly implies that man was to have been immortal had he only refrained from eating from the Tree of Knowledge? An answer to this question becomes apparent upon examining what happened the day man did, in fact, eat from the forbidden tree. He did *not* die. Rather, on that day man was informed "with anguish you will give birth and from the sweat of your brow will you produce bread" (3:16,19). It is thus possible to understand God's original threat of death to refer not to the end of man's physical existence but to a figurative death. Indeed, Radak (2:19) states that when man is threatened with death for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, God refers not to a literal death but to an accursed life characterized by struggle and pain. And, in fact, on the fateful day on which man sinned, he was cursed but does not die.<sup>11</sup>

According to this reading, man was mortal from the beginning. As a creation from the dust, he will eventually return to the dust. This was true before he sinned and was irrespective of his behavior. Yet, the circumstances of his finite life depend on whether he chooses to follow or to violate the dictates of the divine command. If he adheres to God's injunction his efforts will meet unmitigated success whereas violating His wishes will yield "thorns and thistles" (3:18).<sup>12</sup>

### *The Commandment*

"*Vayetsav*" God commanded man, "from all the trees of the garden you may eat, yet from the Tree of Knowledge you must not eat" (2:16-17). A literal reading of the text would see this prohibition as limited to the consumption of the fruit of a tree. Rabbinic tradition, however, understood this Divine communication to represent far more. In fact, the Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 56b derives all of the Noahide laws from this verse including *dinim*; a mandate to develop a legal system designed to cultivate and maintain a just and ethical society.<sup>13</sup> According to this rabbinic perspective, God's commandment symbolizes the entirety of universal man's heavenly mandated ethical and spiritual duties. This *tsivui*, then, represents the very purpose of man's creation. Through God's commandments, man receives a Divine mandate for how to relate to His world. And, in submitting to this mandate, man enters into a relationship with the Almighty and transforms his life into a God ordained existence.

### *Yetser Hara and Behirah Hofshit*

For man's behavior to have consequence in his relationship with God, he must desire the forbidden. Indeed, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 89a) teaches that God's commandments are intended solely for those in possession of a *yetser hara*; "When Moses ascended on high (to receive the Torah), the ministering angels said to God, Thou desires to give the secret treasure to flesh and blood?" The angels saw themselves, not man, as most deserving to receive the Torah. Moses, however, rebuffs their challenge asking "do angels possess a *yetser hara*?" Moses asserts that divine prohibitions become significant precisely because of the allure of the prohibited acts. It is the seduction of the prohibited that invests rejecting it with meaning. To this argument the angels had no response and "concede straightaway."<sup>14</sup>

Yet, possessing a *yetser hara* is a necessary but insufficient condition for investing man's actions with consequence. Man must also have the free will to resist it. He must be able to freely navigate between the competing desires of maintaining his relationship with God and indulging in the forbidden. Abarbanel states this explicitly with regard to the Tree of Knowledge; "a commandment is given only to the one who possesses free choice and free will."<sup>15</sup> While man is seduced by the tree, he is, at the same time, endowed with *behirah hofshit*, free will, to rein in his desires and adhere to the Divine command.

### *Mortality*

I would suggest that there is yet another condition necessary if man is to set forth on a journey of spiritual transformation. He must be mortal. Indeed, it appears to be a truism of human behavior that the impulse for man to accomplish and to transcend himself is driven by the recognition of his finitude. Man's awareness of his mortality invests his choices with the urgency of the mishnaic teaching "*im lo akhshav aimatai, if not now when?*"<sup>16</sup> Mortal man is impelled to act today for tomorrow he may die. Immortal man, on the other hand, need neither prioritize his projects nor pursue them with vigor; there would always be a time and an opportunity to complete them later. For immortal man, the boundless leisure of eternity would rob his free will of any practical significance and would leave him forever fixed and unchanged. The Talmud captures the static spiritual nature of an eternal life when it states "at the end of days *mitsvot* will cease to apply."<sup>17</sup> The end of days refers to *tehiyat hametim* when the dead will be resurrected to live eternally. At that time there will be no Divine commandments. Indeed, God issues commandments neither to the immortal angels nor, according to this Talmudic teaching, to

immortal man. It is only mortal man with whom God enters into a dynamic relationship.<sup>18</sup>

Mortality, then, is a *sine qua non* for man to undertake a spiritual journey.<sup>19</sup> Man's mortality is not simply an incidental result of his having been created from the dust. It is a prerequisite for his being able to enter into a transformative relationship with God.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Tree of Knowledge*

If the Tree of Knowledge represents man's relationship with God, what sort of information does it impart? What knowledge does it reveal? In truth, the tree, in Hebrew, is referred to as *ets hada'at*. Though *da'at* may mean knowledge, in the Bible it may also refer to an intimate experience: "*vehaAdam yada et Hava ishto*—and man was intimate with Eve, his wife" (4:1). Perhaps, then, the *ets hada'at* provided no new knowledge. Rather, the *ets hada'at* was the means through which man intimately experienced the strain of choosing between good and evil. The tree was the medium through which man grappled with the tension between his loyalty to God and the seduction of his desires. Whether the Tree of Knowledge produced grapes, citrus fruits or wheat, as argued by rabbinic tradition,<sup>21</sup> the significance of partaking of its fruit lies in the fact that it was the tree forbidden by God. Indeed, the Midrash Tadshe appears to state this explicitly:

Why did God permit all the trees in the garden yet forbid one of them?  
So that man would gaze upon the (forbidden one) constantly and  
remember his creator.<sup>22</sup>

According to this midrashic teaching, it is not an inherent quality within its fruit but the commandment context of the eating that endows the *ets ha-daat* with its great consequence for Man.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Serpent*

If, as argued above, the Tree of Knowledge represents man's struggling with his competing desires, what role does the tempter, that is, the serpent play in this story? How does the serpent relate to man's inner conflict? An answer may be found in the Zohar which states "the serpent is man's evil inclination."<sup>24</sup> According to this source, the serpent symbolizes man's thought processes when confronted by temptation. Eve's conversation with the serpent is, in fact, a conversation she conducts with herself. The arguments put forward by the serpent represent the arguments man uses to rationalize his disobedience to God's command.

## *Naked Before God*

Upon consuming from the Tree of Knowledge Adam and Eve “knew that they were naked” (3:7). The midrash expresses surprise regarding this revelation noting that if the verse refers to physical nakedness, how could man have been previously unaware of his condition as “even a blind man knows he is unclothed?”<sup>25</sup> In answering this question, the midrash explains that nakedness here is symbolic and refers to a sense of humiliation before God; “he was given one commandment and stripped himself bare of it.”<sup>26</sup>

## *The Tree of Life*

After meting out the punishment for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, God becomes concerned about man’s eating from the Tree of Life; “now (that man has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge), lest he partake from the Tree of Life as well, and live forever, *vehai le’olam*” (3:22). This tree, is not simply a Tree of Life but a Tree of Eternal Life; *vehai le’olam*. Man’s eating from the Tree of Life will result in the undesirable outcome of his becoming immortal. But for whom is this outcome undesirable? I would suggest that man’s becoming immortal is undesirable for man himself. Indeed, as I have argued above, immortality is incompatible with the unique mission imparted to a creation charged with entering into a transformative relationship with God. Were man to become immortal, he would become forever unchanging and spiritually static. Absent a transformative relationship with God, man would frustrate the Divinely intended purpose of his creation.<sup>27</sup>

## *Habitual Sin*

What sort of tree is this Tree of Eternal Life and why does eating from its fruit result in so severe an outcome for man? It would appear that the consequence of partaking of this tree lies in the fact that man would be *repeating* the sin of violating God’s will. Indeed, the Tree of Life, like the Tree of Knowledge, is forbidden to man; “lest he partake from the Tree of Life” (3:22). By violating, yet again, the will of God, man would become a habitual sinner and thereby fundamentally undermine his relationship with the Almighty. The significance of habitual sin is expressed in the Talmudic teaching that “when a man has performed a sin and then violates it recurrently, *na’aset lo keheter*—it is perceived by him that the prohibited has become permitted.”<sup>28</sup> This truism notes the difference between the one who sins once and the one who habitually sins. Sinning once represents losing the struggle between the allure of the forbidden and fealty to God. Habitually sinning represents the end of the

struggle. The habitual sinner no longer maintains loyalty to the commandments. When man views the commandments *keheter*, he releases himself from his relationship with God.

Of course, habitual sin refers to a mindset rather than to the number of times a person sins. Each person is undoubtedly individual as to the number of times he must sin in order to reach habituation. Nonetheless, in the Biblical story, eating from the Tree of Life, after having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, symbolizes man's perceiving the prohibited as permitted.

Man's first sin was one in which the seductive powers of the Tree of Knowledge overcame his allegiance to God's command. Yet, despite his sinning, man remained devoted to God as evidenced by his great embarrassment following his failure; he ran, in shame, to hide from God.<sup>29</sup> But, if man were to eat from the Tree of Life, thereby again disobeying God's will, it would indicate that man had not simply lost a battle to remain faithful to God but that he no longer possessed the desire to maintain a relationship with Him.

### *Eternal Life*

The Tree of Life is called the Tree of Eternal Life since through it man would lose the benefit of his mortal humanity. He would become bereft of a transformative relationship with God. An eternal life represents the antithesis of the Divinely intended purpose of creating man from the dust; a man who during his limited life span is to undertake a spiritual journey.

Like the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Life contains no inherent qualities. Its significance lies in man's violating the word of God. The tree would not impart actual physical immortality to man. Indeed, man of the dust was destined to die irrespective of his sinning and he would die if he were to eat from the Tree of Life as well. Yet, upon partaking from the Tree of Life, man would become, relative to his relationship with God, effectively immortal. By habitually sinning, man would put an end to his spiritual journey. He would terminate his unique relationship with God; a relationship that is contingent upon his mortality. It is to avoid this outcome that God safeguards the tree with a revolving sword and banishes man from the garden. God deters man from losing the potential of his humanity; from becoming effectively immortal and thereby ending his spiritual journey.

### *One Tree*

According to the midrashic reading proposed in this essay neither the Tree of Knowledge nor the Tree of Life is invested with inherent properties. Man is transformed upon eating from these trees because by doing so he violates

once and then recurrently God's commandment. As such, the Trees of Knowledge and of Life may well be one and the same. The forbidden tree, prior to man eating from it, is an *ets hada'at*, a tree through which man intimately experiences the tension of his *behirah*, of having to choose between good and evil. Once having eaten from the *ets hada'at*, the tree is then transformed into an *ets hahayim*; a tree symbolizing effective immortality, spiritual stasis and an end to a dynamic relationship with God.<sup>30</sup>

### Back to the Text

We are now in a position to address the apparent difficulty with R. Kimhi's explication noted in the opening paragraph of this essay. How are we to understand the verse where God says "now (that man has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge) lest he partake from the Tree of Life as well" (3:22)? If the trees are one and the same, then by eating from the Tree of Knowledge man had already partaken of the Tree of Life! The midrashic reading offered in this essay, provides an answer to this question. At the beginning, the tree in the center of the garden was an *ets hada'at*; a tree through which man experienced the seduction of the forbidden. Only after eating from the tree did it become an *ets hahayim*; a tree representing the potential for habitual sin. Man, upon consuming from the *ets hada'at*, had not yet eaten from the *ets hahayim*. It was his very sin which transformed the tree into the Tree of Eternal Life.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

This essay suggests a reading of the Genesis story which views man as having been created mortal. And, mortal man's divinely intended purpose is to enter into a dynamic relationship with God. Yet, realizing this purpose is no easy task. Man must contend with the burning desires of his *yetser hara*; desires often in competition with his allegiance to the Divine will. Indeed, man will sometimes fail and succumb to the seduction of the forbidden fruits. But, despite his failings, God will intervene to prevent man from severing his relationship with Him. God will place obstacles and safeguards to deter man from consuming from the *ets hahayim*; the tree symbolizing habitual sin and a life of static spiritual existence. The Bible teaches that ultimately, God will help man in his struggle with the challenges posed by the solitary tree located in the center of the garden.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

1. R. Joseph Kimhi (11<sup>th</sup> century), father to the better known Rabbis David (Radak) and Moshe (Ramak) Kimhi, was a Biblical exegete in his own right. His extant works were published in Joseph Gad(ed) *Hamisha Meorot HaGedolim* (Johannesburg 1953). R. Kimhi's position regarding the trees of the garden is cited in the above mentioned work in *Perush HaTorah LeRabbenu Yosef Kara* (Mahari Kara) s.v. *ve'ets ha'hayim* as well as in R. Jacob ben Asher's *Perush HaTurim HaShalem* (Gen. 2:9).
2. The term "man" in this verse refers to humanity, both male and female and is used in that way throughout this essay. All references to chapter and verse are to the book of Genesis unless stated otherwise.
3. Gershom Scholem in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: 1941) pp. 404 footnote 105 cites 13th century kabalistic sources which understand that the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge were initially one tree and were subsequently separated as a result of man's sin. These mystical teachings can perhaps serve as a basis for an esoteric explanation of R. Kimhi's explanation; an approach distinct from the one taken in this essay.
4. Onkelos's use of *bemitsiut* as the translation of *betokh* is noteworthy. In nearly all other Biblical verses (for example 3:8, 9:21, 18:24, 18:26, 23:10, 37:7, 40:20, 42:5 in the book of Genesis alone) Onkelos translates the word *betokh* as *bego*, which means within. The choice of *bemitsiut*, with regard to the location of the trees of the garden, implies that Onkelos understands that these trees are not simply within the garden but are at its very center.
5. *Perush HaRosh* cited in *Humash Hadar Zekainim* s.v. *velakah gam me'ets hahayim*. Hizkuni (2:16) espouses this view as well.
6. The presumptions upon which the midrashic construct of this essay is built are by no means universally accepted positions. In fact, many of the propositions of the essay are a matter of dispute amongst traditional commentators. Nevertheless, the essay cites traditional sources in support of its assertions and attempts to integrate them into a unified conceptual framework which provides an explanation for the reasoning and significance of the claim that the Trees of Life and of Knowledge are one and the same.
7. *Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudai* 3, cited by Rashi (2:7).
8. *Midrash Ne'elam*, Genesis 18, cited in *Torah Shelema* (2:17) letter 243.
9. *Bereshit Rabbah* (9:4)
10. See also Ibn Ezra (3:6) s.v. *vayitpiru* who states explicitly that man was created mortal.
11. R. Mordekhai Leb Katzenelenbogen in his commentary on Radak, printed in *Humash Torat Hayim*, suggests that Radak finds support for his explication from the Biblical verse "behold I have placed before you today the choice of life and good or death and evil" (Deuteronomy 30:15). In this verse death is equated with an evil, accursed life.
12. According to this reading when man is later punished and God says, "from the sweat of your brow you will produce bread *until you return to the dust*" (3:19) the words "*until you return to the dust*" are not part of the punishment but rather inform man that he will be cursed all the days of his life.
13. This expansive view of the Noahide law of *dinim* is consistent with the position of Ramban (34:13) s.v. *vaya'anu*

14. Rashi (3:25) s.v. *velo* is of the opinion that “man did not have a *yetser hara* until he consumed from the Tree of Knowledge.” I would suggest that Rashi views the commandment regarding the Tree of Knowledge as being of a fundamentally different nature than the Noahide laws or the *mitsvot* of the Torah. These latter commandments impose obligations on man and presuppose his possession of an evil inclination. On the other hand, a commandment given to a man who lacks a *yetser hara* is simply an expression of the Divine will. The Psalmist describes this latter type of commandment in the verse “*Hu tsivah vinivrau*, He commanded and they (the sun, moon and bright stars) came into being” (Psalms 148:5). If man was created, pre-sin, without a *yetser hara* then the *tsivui* regarding the Tree of Life makes no demands of him. Rather, the commandment describes the properties God invests in this tree and the natural consequences for man should he partake of its fruit.
15. Abarbanel Genesis 2 s.v. *vayita Hashem Elokim gan b’eden*.
16. Mishnah Avot 1:14.
17. *Niddah* 61b in accordance with the explication of Tosafot s.v. *amar Rav Yosef* and *Hidushai HaRitva* s.v. *veha di’amrinan*.
18. A traditional source which would appear to contradict the contention that no change occurs in eternity may be found in *Shulhan Arukh, Orakh Hayyim* 621:6. That source discusses the *Yizkor* service, in which the dead are remembered on Yom Kippur. According to R. Moses Isserles this custom, based on Sifri Deuteronomy 148, reflects the belief that both the living and the souls of the dead are judged on that holy day. This would seemingly imply that the soul, having reached its eternal resting place, can still undergo spiritual change. I would suggest, however, that this source likely understands that the souls of the departed do not, in fact, exist in eternity. Rather, eternity is attained only upon the resurrection of the dead at which point no further change takes place.
19. Ramban (2:17) s.v. *biyom akholkha* states that man was created immortal. If, as argued, an eternal life is one in which commandments are not operative, Ramban must have understood the originally intended purpose of man’s creation to be something other than a transformative relationship with God. Indeed, Ramban (2:9) s.v. *ve’ets hada’at* appears to state so explicitly; “man’s original nature was such that he did whatever was proper for him to do naturally, just as the heavens and all their hosts are faithful workers who do not change from their prescribed course.” According to Ramban, man was initially created without *mitsvot* as understood in the conventional sense. Rather, man was, prior to his eating from the Tree of Knowledge, a never changing being living eternally in accordance with the rules of nature invested in him by God.  
Of course, if man was created a “faithful worker” existing as the “heavens and their hosts”, how did he, in fact, sin? A number of scholars (see, for example, Bezalel Safran, “Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man” in Isador Twersky (ed) *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*. (Cambridge 1983), 75-106 and Moshe Halbertal *Al Derekh HaEmet: HaRamban veYetsirata Shel haMesoret* (Heb (Jerusalem 2006), 117-148) have proposed answers to this question. While this issue merits further elucidation, it none the less appears that Ramban did view man as having been created spiritually static.
20. It could be argued, in contradistinction to the formulation I have suggested, that immortal man can, in fact, experience the impulse to accomplish so long as his immortality is contingent. Specifically, if man’s immortality was dependent upon his

behavior, he would be driven to act in a way that would realize his potential immortality. I would counter, however, that contingent immortality would provide man with the impulse to accomplish only the bare minimum necessary to maintain his immortality. Anything beyond the minimum requirements could, and would, wait for a later time. As such, if man is to transcend himself, he must be mortal.

21. *Berakhot* 40a and *Breishit Rabbah* 15:7.
22. *Midrash Tadshe* Chapter 7, cited by Nechama Leibowitz in her *Iyunim Besefer Breshit* (Jerusalem 1975), 19.
23. The idea that the Tree of Knowledge derives its significance from the fact that it is forbidden and not from inherent qualities within its fruit is developed by Nechama Leibowitz op cit pp. 19-20.
24. Genesis 437
25. *Breshit Rabbah* 19:6 cited in Rashi 3:7.
26. If nakedness represents a sense of embarrassment before God, how are we to understand the verse “man and his wife were naked, and they were not embarrassed” (2:25). This verse refers to man *prior* to his sinning. If man had not yet sinned, why is he referred to as being naked? Furthermore, what is the meaning of man’s lack of embarrassment in the face of his nakedness?

An answer to these questions becomes apparent upon careful analysis of the Hebrew words used to describe man in these verses. After sinning, man is referred to as *airum*, which indeed means naked. Once he has sinned, man is naked before God. However, prior to sinning man is referred to as *arum*, which means not naked but clever. *Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel* notes this distinction and translates the word *airum* (3:7), used post-sin, as *artilain*—naked, whereas he translates the word *arum* (2:25), used pre-sin, as *hakhim*—clever. According to this translation, prior to sinning, man is not described as being naked. Rather the verse should be translated to mean “man and his wife were very clever.”

But, if man, pre-sin, is described as clever, what does the verse mean when it says “and they were not embarrassed?” What is the relationship between embarrassment and being clever? Here again a careful analysis of the Hebrew text provides an answer. The verse reads “man and his wife were very clever *velo hitboshahu*” which is usually translated to mean “and they were not embarrassed.” Yet the Hebrew word for embarrassment is “*hitbaishu*” not “*hitboshahu*.” *Hitboshahu* may be understood to mean persist or linger. Indeed, *Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel* translates the verse to read “man and his wife were very clever but their cleverness did not persist” (2:25). And why did their cleverness not persist? Because they were soon outwitted by the snake, who was “*arum*—most clever, of all the creatures” (3:1).

27. The beginning of this same verse (3:22) “*hen haAdam haya ke’ehad mimenu ladaat tov vera*, if translated literally means, “Behold, man has become like one of us, knowing good from evil.” Traditional exegetes struggled with understanding the import of this verse, which implies that man’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge resulted in his becoming like God. Significant for the purposes of this essay is R. Akiva’s midrashic reading of the text (*Mekhilta BeShalah* 42:6, c.f. *Torah Shlema* (3:22) letter 189): “Behold, man has chosen one of the paths placed before him (=ke’ehad) using the free will that is within him (=mimenu) to experience choosing between good and evil (=lada’at tov vera) now, lest he partake from the Tree of Life as well.” According to R. Akiva, man, having exercised his free will, and choosing to sin by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, is now at risk of partaking from the Tree of Life (thereby suffering the negative results of ending his unique relationship with God).

28. *Kiddushin* 40a
29. In addition to hiding from God, man clothes himself; “they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves belts” (3:7). These clothes may be understood to represent man’s attempt to regain his dignity and return to a God-ordained existence.
30. When introducing the tree, the verse states “the Tree of Life within the garden and the Tree of Knowledge” (2:9) mentioning the Tree of Life first. I suggest that while the Tree of Knowledge chronologically precedes the Tree of Life, the Torah mentions the Tree of Life first as it is this aspect of the tree which represents its ultimate significance for man.
31. It should be noted that in addition to addressing the location of the Trees of Knowledge and of Life in the center of the garden, R. Kimhi’s interpretation provides an answer to a number of textual difficulties. Why, for example, does God become concerned with the Tree of Life only *after* man has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge? If the Tree of Life was forbidden, why is God not concerned that man will consume from its fruits prior to his eating from the Tree of Knowledge? Additionally, God clearly does not want man to eat from the Tree of Life. Yet, God never commands man to refrain from eating from this tree. If the tree is forbidden, why is man not informed of its impermissibility? Finally, what prevented man from eating from the Tree of Life *prior* to his partaking from the Tree of Knowledge? In the absence of a prohibition, was it simply fortuitous that man had not yet, by chance, partaken of the Tree of Life? The midrashic approach suggested in this essay would argue that God became concerned about the Tree of Life only after man had sinned because prior to man’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the tree had not yet become the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life, which symbolizes recurrent sin, comes into existence as a *result* of man’s having sinned. For this same reason, God did not command man to refrain from eating from the Tree of Life as man could not do so unless he first violated the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Finally, man *could not* eat first from the Tree of Life because the singular tree *became* the Tree of Life only *after* man had first eaten from the Tree of Knowledge.
32. I am grateful to my father Dr. Avraham Becker, my brother David Becker, my dear friend Andy Weinstein and my teachers, Rabbis Moshe Berger, Nachum Muschel and David Shatz for sharing their insights and suggestions during the development of this essay.